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ABSTRACT

This digest provides a basic introduction to the national standards in foreign language learning, essentially a set of content standards that define what students should know and be able to do in foreign language instruction in a K-12 sequence. First, background on the development of the standards is provided, and a description of the standards' basic purpose is outlined. The second section discusses the standards' organization around five main goals: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. The eleven standards distributed among these goal categories are the content standards that ostensibly give foreign language students "the powerful key to successful communication: knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom." The third section provides some detail on what the standards mean for foreign language educators at state and local levels, with particular attention to curriculum design and lesson planning. Finally, an illustration is given of how interdisciplinary lessons, the use of technology, and community resources can be woven together to create an exciting and comprehensive project that addresses all the national standards. (VWL)

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Meeting the National Standards: Now What Do I Do?

Jean LeLoup and Robert Ponterio, SUNY Cortland

Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century (hereafter referred to as *Standards*) was published in 1996. The statement of philosophy from which *Standards* was generated embodies the goals and beliefs of the foreign language (FL) profession.

> Language and communication are at the heart of the human experience. The United States must educate students who are equipped linguistically and culturally to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad. This imperative envisions a future in which ALL students will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language. (*Standards*, 1996, p. 7)

Standards is one of the most far reaching and encompassing documents of the foreign language (FL) profession, yet most foreign language educators are either unaware of it or unclear as to its intent, import, and impact. This digest aims to explain the standards document in general, dispel some misconceptions about it, and discuss its relevance for the classroom FL teacher.

What Are the Standards, Anyway?

Standards is a discipline-specific document that is an out-growth of the long-term national strategy proposed by the President and state governors at their 1989 education summit in Charlottesville, Virginia and delineated in the booklet, *America 2000: An Educational Strategy* (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1991). The strategy was designed to accomplish six national educational goals that have far-reaching consequences for all schools at all levels and for all subject areas. (The entire thrust of this meeting and its resultant document have since been referred to as either "America 2000" or "Goals 2000.") The FL profession has definitely made progress: Foreign language instruction is finally being recognized as a vital part of the national goals and included as a core subject area. Indeed, one of the principal mandates of Goals 2000 is "to improve language instruction at all levels and to facilitate sequential learning."

To realize the goals of America 2000, academic disciplines were expected to delineate national standards for instruction and learning. In 1993, a collaborative effort of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, the American Association of Teachers of French, the American Association of Teachers of German, and the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese resulted in federal funding, and the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project was born. A task force of 11 FL teachers, representing the gamut of FL professionals from literature instructors to public classroom teachers to second language acquisition researchers, was formed. Hundreds of additional FL professionals had a chance to provide input and suggestions throughout the many drafts of the *Standards* (Brown & Phillips, 1997; *Standards*, 1996).

The FL standards are essentially content standards that define what students should know and be able to do in FL instruction in a K-12 sequence. Granted, most public school systems in the United States do not have a K-12 FL instructional sequence at this time, but the standards provide a way to focus on a common vision to reach that very goal. In this sense, the standards document is a political one, delineating the goals of the profession and making a case for institutional and instructional change in the way FL programs are conceived on the local, regional, and national levels. It also serves as a means for public relations between FL professionals and administrators, parents, and students by stating content goals at distinct intervals (Grades 4, 8, and 12) for all FL learners.

The standards are not, however, a curriculum guide. They are not meant to dictate local curricula or even assessment. Indeed, evaluation and assessment are to be defined locally: at district, school, and even individual course levels. The assessment becomes, then, the cadre of performance standards by which students are evaluated. Nor are the standards tied to any particular instructional method. To do so would be to limit their applicability, flexibility, and universality. They are instead a statement of what FL education should prepare students to do. Given certain overriding goals of FL education, the standards articulate the essential skills and knowledge language learners need in order to achieve said goals.

Organization of the Standards

The standards are organized around five main goals: *communication, cultures, connections, comparisons,* and *communities*. Eleven standards in total, distributed among these goal categories, are the content standards that ostensibly give FL students "the powerful key to successful communication: *knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom*" (*Standards*, 1996, p. 11). Each standard is accompanied by sample progress indicators for Grades 4, 8, and 12, which reflect student progress in meeting a particular standard but are not standards in and of themselves. The premises of the indicators are that they can be realistically achieved at some level of performance by all students, they can be arrived at through a myriad of instructional modes, and they are measurable or assessable in a variety of ways. The indicators are meant to be interpreted by FL teachers and curriculum developers who will transform them into classroom lessons and activities. The sample progress indicators can also be used to assist in establishing acceptable performance levels for FL learners at the local level.

A final feature of the standards document is an extensive listing of FL lessons that target specific content standards. These examples are called learning scenarios and are included for a number of purposes. First, they provide examples of how classroom practice relates to the standards. Second, they are meant to allow divergent thinking and stimulate creativity in lesson and curriculum design. Third, they are both learner centered and standards driven. Last, they clearly illustrate the interrelationship of the standards and their goals. Many different languages are represented in the scenarios. Future companion documents to the national standards are planned with language-specific examples and themes.

What Does This Mean for Me?

Despite all the attention that the move toward subject-area standards in American education has been receiving in the media due to a certain level of politicalization surrounding them, what matters most to the individual teacher is how the standards may change their classroom. As they are written, the standards can help the teacher communicate with students, parents, and administrators about what is happening in the classroom and why. The inclusion of FLs in the Goals 2000 mandate helps the teacher demonstrate that FLs are a core subject for all students, not to be considered peripheral in the curriculum. Concomitantly, the clear differentiation of national content standards from state and local curriculum frameworks and performance standards, the flexibility built into the standards document itself, and the voluntary nature of the standards implementation can help allay any fear of losing community control of the education process (*Standards*, 1996, 24-25). Although the standards represent expectations of progress that all students will make toward achieving performance goals, the possible levels of proficiency attainable for each goal will still represent a broad range allowing students to excel beyond any minimal expectations. In day to day

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teaching, the standards are particularly useful in curriculum design, lesson planning, and assessment.

Curriculum Design. The primary message conveyed by the five C's—communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, communities—is that each of these goal areas is important and has a place in the FL curriculum. Thanks to the profession's longstanding focus on the role of communication and context in language learning and the recognition of the functional and sociolinguistic aspects of language, the goals of the standards are not new to most teachers. The national standards are not a curriculum, but their specific organization can help us analyze our curriculum by looking closely at what we are doing to see to what extent we are already implementing the standards in our classes. Many efforts in this area have been undertaken by teachers around the country (e.g., in Wisconsin, Nebraska, Kentucky) and reported at national and regional FL meetings (Clementi & Sandrock, 1997; Welch, 1997). An efficient and common approach involves beginning with a listing of all activities now used in achieving the current curricular goals and using a table to check off standards that are addressed by these. The result of analysis provides a clear graphical display of standards being met and areas that may be underrepresented in the curriculum, and leads to the development of a better balance in the future. This is not to say that all of the goals are equal or that all of the standards should receive equal weight. Those decisions are up to the teacher, but a better awareness of how much attention is focused on each goal should help in making those decisions.

Lesson Plans. With curricular goals and specific progress indicators in mind, instructional and assessment strategies may be designed to do more to meet the standards criteria in weaker areas of the curriculum. Although examples of activities aligned with the standards are available in learning scenarios published with the standards, the sharing of such materials is one of the best ways teachers can help each other adapt to these criteria. Many groups are working on sharing learning scenarios, but the more we can help each other, the better our chances will be to arrive at a broad implementation of standards-based curricula.

The following example is suggested as an illustration of weaving interdisciplinary lessons, the use of technology, and community resources together to create an exciting and comprehensive project that addresses all of the national standards. The *Aconcagua Project* calls for students to "climb" this famous peak in South America. The project originates in the language class (here obviously Spanish) but spills over into several other disciplines with careful planning and collaboration on the part of the instructors involved. To complete this assignment, the students need to plan the entire expedition from start to finish in order to ensure its success. They will work in groups individually, sharing their information at designated intervals (Standards 1.1 and 1.3). They will collect data from a variety of sources, both traditional and technology based (Standard 1.2). The Aconcagua Official Home Page (http://www.aconcagua.com.ar/aconca.html) will be very helpful for securing much information on the Internet.

Planning the trip will entail everything from getting to the country (airfares, routes) and meals and lodging before the climb, to the entrance fee to the park and mountain, conditions of the climb (both geophysical and physiological), costs incurred by the expedition on-site, selection of the optimal ascent route, and so on. While much of the discussion and planning will take place in the language class, much of the data collection and planning can be reinforced by studying parallel concepts in other disciplines (Standards 3.1 and 3.2). Below are some examples of activities that can be implemented in other subject classes.

Science (Standard 3.1): Students study atmospheric conditions (e.g., humidity, temperatures) as one ascends the mountain; this information will also be helpful in planning what apparel to take on the trip.

Geography (Standards 3.1 and 3.2): Students will need a wide variety of information including maps, latitude and longitude points, geographical location of the country and the peak, and so forth.

Math (Standard 3.1): Many mathematical concepts and functions can be reinforced while gathering necessary information for the expedition: temperatures, heights, pressures, measurement; reading graphs on statistics for climbing (age, sex, etc.).

Spanish (Standards 1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 2.2, 1.3, 4.1, 4.2): vocabulary on weather, numbers, food, nutrition, climbing equipment; planning the final ascent will entail making comparisons of routes to ascend and descend (here students can debate, compare, and contrast, making decisions based on best information presented.

Conclusion

Clearly, the standards have much to say to us as a profession. They were drafted as a guide to inform classroom instruction. They are also a yardstick by which to measure classroom practice and performance. The standards were generated from the basic premise that language and culture are the foundations of communication in the world of today and the 21st century. They are an in-house product in the sense that hundreds of FL teachers were involved in developing and testing them to ensure that *Standards* is a workable and practical document that will meet the needs of the classroom teacher. As we move forward as a profession, the standards can be the unifying thread that connects our curricula, our teaching, and our students' learning. By aligning our instruction with the standards and by sharing our ideas, activities, and learning scenarios with other colleagues, we will strengthen the position of FLs in the national educational agenda, and we will empower our language students to be lifelong learners and users.

Standards for Foreign Language Learning

Communication
Communicate in Languages Other Than English
Standard 1.1: Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions.
Standard 1.2: Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics.
Standard 1.3: Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics.

Cultures
Gain Knowledge and Understanding of Other Cultures
Standard 2.1: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied.
Standard 2.2: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied.

Connections
Connect with Other Disciplines and Acquire Information.
Standard 3.1: Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language.
Standard 3.2: Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures.

Comparisons
Develop Insight into the Nature of Language and Culture
Standard 4.1: Students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own.
Standard 4.2: Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.

Communities
Participate in Multilingual Communities at Home & Around the World
Standard 5.1: Students use the language both within and beyond the school setting.
Standard 5.2: Students show evidence of becoming life-long learners by using the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment.

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